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**MY SISTER SARAH**

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# **MY SISTER SARAH**

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**Report**

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# **MY SISTER SARAH**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2013

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*My Sister Sarah* is a 25-minute long documentary film about my sister, Sarah Chatelain, a recovering methamphetamine addict from Fargo, North Dakota. Utilizing a combination of family home videos, Super 8 film and verité footage of Sarah's contemporary life, *My Sister Sarah* relates Sarah's journey with drug addiction from childhood through recovery. This report contains the process of creating the film: its inception, production, and completion.



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## CHAPTER I: DRUGS IN AMERICA

According to *the National Survey on National Drug Use and Health*, last published in 2011 by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Association, “an estimated 22.5 million Americans aged 12 or older—or 8.7 percent of the population—had used an illicit drug or abused a psychotherapeutic medication (such as a pain reliever, stimulant, or tranquilizer) in the past month.”<sup>1</sup> It found that drug use is most prevalent among people in late teens and twenties; 23.8 percent of 18- to 20-year-olds reported using an illicit drug.<sup>2</sup> Despite this prevalence, drug addiction is still highly stigmatized in American society. Addicts are often stereotyped and marginalized, making it difficult for them to seek assistance for their addiction. Perhaps most disappointing is the gap between those who need treatment for substance abuse and those who receive it. “An estimated 21.6 million Americans (8.4 percent) needed treatment for a problem related to drugs or alcohol, but only about 2.3 million people (less than 1 percent) received treatment at a specialty facility,” the NSNDUH states.<sup>3</sup> *My Sister Sarah* gives a face to the complexities of drug addiction through my sister’s personal experience. Only by seeing the person suffering behind the addiction can we begin to understand and treat their abuse.

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<sup>1</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, *Results from the 2011 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Summary of National Findings*, NSDUH Series H-44, HHS Publication No. (SMA) 12-4713. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> See Footnote 1.

<sup>3</sup> See Footnote 1.

## CHAPTER II: THE FILM'S INCEPTION



*Figure 1: Sarah and Serenity*

My sister, Sarah, has struggled with drug addiction for most of her life. She started using at age 15, and has gone through multiple stages of recovery and relapse over the past 15 years. As a teenager and young adult I failed to understand her addiction. I was callous and bitter towards her inability to get her life “in order.” It was not until college that I began to wrap my head around the complexities of drug addiction and the torturous relationship that drug addicts have with substances. As we were riding in the car together to our lake house in Minnesota, my sister revealed many things about her past that I never knew. I was in awe of what Sarah had survived. I began to realize that my sister was a kind-hearted, strong person with a life-threatening disease. But many

people in our society fail to understand that, including some of my closest family members.

Over the next few years I occasionally thought of pursuing a film about my sister's life. After finishing my second year of graduate school at the University of Texas at Austin, I began brainstorming my next project. It had occurred to me that this could be the time to make a film about Sarah. But the subject matter was so personal and complex that I was intimidated by the reality of pursuing the project. Doing something simpler like a narrative short to complete my graduate degree seemed increasingly advantageous.

But in the middle of my decision-making process I received a phone call from my mother that Sarah's husband, Jimmy, had been in a serious car accident. He was in the intensive care unit in a coma in my hometown of Fargo, North Dakota. Being a thousand miles away in Austin, Texas, there was not much I could do but wait for news over the passing days. As time went on his condition worsened, and my sister, his wife of less than a year, was burdened with the decision to take him off life support and not resuscitate. He passed away within a week. Later my sister revealed that Jimmy, also a recovering addict, had relapsed and was using synthetic marijuana at the time of the accident.

This terrible incident and Sarah's strength throughout the subsequent days made it clear that I needed to make this film about my sister, now. That fall I returned to Fargo to film her, and over the next two years I would interview Sarah, my father, mother, and brother to tell Sarah's struggle with drug addiction.

### CHAPTER III: THE STORY



*Figure 2: North Dakota Sunrise*

Sarah lies in a hospital bed, pregnant. “Tell us Sarah, what name have you picked out for your baby?” my mom asks her. “Serenity,” Sarah replies, with a laugh. She looks happy, healthy. My sister’s story begins with snippets of her daughter, named after the integral prayer used in 12-step programs: *The Serenity Prayer*. We see her pregnant, then holding a tiny premature infant in her arms. She says, “I just hope she’s nothing like me,” in a joking tone. “Now why would you say that?” my Mom replies, earnestly. “Because I gave you a lot of hell.” With her comment, Sarah catapults us back in time to when she was a child and the cycle began.

## SARAH'S FORMATIVE YEARS

Images of Sarah as a child fill the screen: displaying a gingerbread house she created, drawing, playing in the snow, dancing. She talks about how she always felt like an outsider in her family, even today. Present day landscapes of North Dakota fill the screen. Inside her room, Sarah is getting ready for work: the daily routine of applying make-up. She listens to hard rock music coming from her phone as her dog watches her from the bed. A tattoo with the name “James Dean” peaks out from behind her tank top strap. “How long have I been an addict? My whole life,” Sarah explains in voice over. She tells us that she has been using since she was 15, about 14 years. When things were going well she could stay clean but as soon as something went wrong, she went back to using.

Flashback to 1988, my sister and I are giving my mom breakfast in bed. Sarah excitedly serves my mom and also directs me as to how to hold the water glass. She clearly displays the character of an elder sibling. In voice over, my mom talks about how Sarah’s grade school years were “not always happy,” and that she had trouble making friends. Then we see Sarah’s sixth birthday. She concentrates hard on making her wish. My dad explains her diagnosed rebellion, also called “oppositional defiance syndrome.” He states, “She wasn’t acting normally.” My father’s perspective of my sister’s behavior and her subsequent addiction reveals itself: *she* was the one who was “not normal.”



Going forward in time to 2013, Sarah is heating up milk in the microwave for her now 19-month-old daughter, Serenity. She talks about how she never “fit into the mold,” even early on. She felt my parents often drew contrasts between her and myself, alienating her from the family. Finally, as a teenager, she gave up on trying to fit in.

Back to 1989, Sarah is trying her hardest to squeeze cake icing out of a metal tube. She is decorating a cake for Lucas, my younger brother’s first birthday. She swears, “God” out of frustration and my mom scolds her, “Sarah, don’t say that.” My mother’s voice floats over the images of my sister and I trying to ice the cake. “You always want to look like the perfect family,” she says. She really wanted the best for her children, to give them as many opportunities as possible. My mom grew up in a poor family, and she always wanted us to have everything. “But maybe there were things that weren’t perfect,” she admits.

My mom pulls up to Sarah’s small house in the early morning hours. It’s still dark. As she comes in, we hear the chaos of Sarah trying to get Serenity ready for the day. She puts her snow pants, coat, and hat on and plops her into the car seat in my mom’s truck. As mom drives away, Sarah takes a break on her porch to smoke a cigarette. She reflects on her years as a teenager. “When I started using a lot, and I was getting into a lot of fights in high school, and I wasn’t going to school very often . . . they were like okay, now you can’t leave the house.” She reacted with defiance, staying out and running away from home. My mom was extremely worried. My dad was frustrated and angry. My brother was scared and confused.

## SARAH'S ADDICTION

As super 8 footage of the plains of North Dakota open up, my brother, Lucas talks about one particular instance where my sister was gone for several days without anyone knowing where she was. His voice betrays his worry, “she felt it was better to be sleeping under a bridge on a cardboard box rather than to be at home with us.” Sometime during her sophomore year in high school, Sarah was sent away to a treatment program in Idaho.

My mother and Serenity walk down a snowy path to the front of my childhood home. My mother reflects on her decision to send Sarah away. She knew that Sarah was moving beyond her reach and at her wit's end, looked for alternatives. She helps Serenity up the stony steps as she confides, “I just felt like I had to help her...or try to help her.” There aren't many programs in North Dakota, and the ones that did exist were full. If there are no vacancies, you just have to wait. Things at home were so out of control that she felt she had to act immediately. She looked all over the United States for treatment programs, hoping to find something right for Sarah. However, the place she found looked good on the outside, but the treatment philosophies there were twisted.

As Sarah drives to work, she describes the treatment facility in Idaho. They practiced “primal therapy.” The staff would scream at kids, hoping to break them down and coerce them into admitting things they had done wrong. She says it was a very manipulative form of “treatment.” This was a very traumatic experience for her that had lasting effects on her life. Sarah cracks and begins to cry in the car. My mom voice carries over, “And I really regret that. I regret it so much.”

Sarah, dressed in scrubs, pushes open the huge metal door of a refrigeration room, pulling a plastic cart of blood along with her. She works at a blood bank, organizing and shipping blood to different parts of North Dakota and Minnesota. We hear my mother's voice come over the scene, "Sarah did eventually go back to using. Multiple times she went through recovery, went back to college, and then eventually fell back into using." Then Sarah goes on to talk about what it is like to be addicted to a substance. There is a line you cross where using a drug no longer is fun. It is a torturous relationship in which you have absolutely no control. "I remember when I was using one time and telling myself, 'this is it, I'm not going to use anymore, I'm going to quit this shit because it's getting crazy.' And within hours I'd be high." As she pulls up to the hospital to deliver the blood, she says, "You're living in your own personal hell. And the last time I went out I was in hell."

Sarah walks into my parent's house and Serenity runs up to greet her, arms raised. She missed her mom. "Wanna take a bath?" Sarah asks. Serenity nods, and they walk up the stairs. "I ran off with some friends who took me away to their apartment. I got hooked up with some stuff, some crack cocaine and I just started smoking it and never stopped. Because I wanted to die." At her lowest point of using, Sarah was taking the drug as a form of suicide. She runs the bath water for Serenity and begins to wash her off. Her story continues, "I locked myself in my apartment." She remembers looking up at her face in the mirror and not believing how degenerated her appearance was. Her boyfriend at the time, Jimmy, came to her apartment and wouldn't stop knocking.

Sarah was afraid of Jimmy seeing her in her condition. “It’s not that I don’t want to see you. I just don’t want you to see me. I don’t want you to know what I’ve done, I don’t want you to see what I look like.” And he told her, “I don’t care what you’ve done, and I don’t care what you look like. I just want to see you for one second and make sure you’re okay.” These were the words that clicked for Sarah. She opened the door and Jimmy took care of her for the next few days. Eventually she went into treatment. This was the last time Sarah used substances, nearly 5 years ago. “I don’t know if Jim ever realized how he saved my life.”

### SARAH’S RECOVERY

After completing a treatment program in Fargo, Sarah was able to go back into the world, get a job and support herself. She would regularly attend 12-step program meetings. She kept in touch with Jimmy while in treatment, and he also went through treatment at the same time in a different facility. Three years later they were married. “It was the happiest day of my life,” Sarah says. They were married in Moorhead, Minnesota, very close to my parent’s home.

Almost immediately after their marriage, Sarah became pregnant. This was unexpected, but both she and Jimmy were excited to have a child together. However, Jimmy began to feel the pressures of becoming a father and providing for a family, and took a second job at a steel company. He would come home very late at night. Sarah was also having complications because of her serious diabetes. She would often faint or even

occasionally have seizures. This scared Jimmy even more, as he felt she was his support system. Sarah went into labor prematurely and had to stay in the hospital for about a month before she could have her daughter. The couple decided to name her “Serenity” after one of the cornerstone prayers of many 12-step programs.

After the first few weeks, Jimmy came to the hospital less and less. Sarah was fairly certain that he was using drugs again. He would act erratically on the phone and he was keeping the company of his old using friends. However, he did come to the hospital when Sarah was induced and stayed with her throughout the night. She had to have a c-section. Because Serenity was born so early, they kept her in the Natal Intensive Care Unit for another month. Sarah stayed for a week in the hospital, and then returned home.

She decided she had to leave the situation with Jimmy because he was clearly using and she was afraid it might cause her to relapse. She knew if she did so, it would kill her. So she left the house and went to my parent’s house to stay. After receiving a phone call from Jimmy’s sister that he had come to her giving her money and making nonsensical statements, Sarah, extremely worried, sent him a text message trying to stop him from doing anything irrational. She told him she loved him and that both his daughters loved him as well (he had a daughter from a previous relationship).

After receiving no response from Jimmy, she drove to their apartment looking for him. She noticed police cars in the lot, talking to the manager. She ran up the stairs hoping that maybe Jimmy was home. The policeman turned her around and asked her if she was Sarah Gress, and if her husband was James Dean Gress. She responded that yes,

she was. “I don’t know how to tell you this, but your husband drove into the river in North Moorhead.”

She went to the hospital where Jimmy was taken to, and found him there in the Intensive Care Unit in an induced coma. He had been underwater for 12 minutes and they had to resuscitate him 4 or 5 times. It was clear to her that everything was over. As Jimmy’s closest relative, his wife, she had to make the decision to take him off of life support. Serenity was only two weeks old.

#### AFTERWARD

“If there was one thing I was always so terrified of all the time it was being alone. And I didn’t want to get left behind,” Sarah says as the VHS footage of her as a child comes on the screen once more. Then contemporary footage of my dad and Sarah cutting a turkey follows, as Sarah says, “I’m afraid of her growing up without a dad.” She expresses her fears for her daughter, but that there is still hope. Sarah’s friends and our family gather around to eat Thanksgiving dinner at Sarah’s house. Serenity may not have a father here, but her mother and her family will be her support system. “I tell her every night, you are one lucky little girl. Your dad’s an angel. And if anyone ever gives you shit about it, just know that your dad had to be an angel for you. Because he’s got up there, and I got down here.”

The film ends as it began, with family home videos. But now they are of Serenity and Sarah together. “If you were to reassure her of one thing what would it be?” I ask. “I’m not going to leave her,” Sarah says resolutely. “She will not be left behind.”

## CHAPTER IV: VISUAL APPROACH



*Figure 3: Serenity*

When the idea to relate Sarah's story in documentary form, I envisioned using animation to tell past events in combination with contemporary footage of my sister's life. Sarah always used art in different forms as a way to express herself, most recently designing tattoos for others. I am very drawn to using animation within documentaries, as I shy away from "talking heads" that are so often relied upon in traditional documentaries. However, with the amount of animation necessary and the type of animation I felt was ideal, many animators said it was not feasible within the realm of my budget. This led me to think of other alternatives to artistically convey the past events of



my sister's life and her addiction. My cinematographer and I experimented with Super 8 footage, and I brought in VHS videos of my sister and family when we were very young.

### SUPER 8

On our numerous trips to North Dakota, we shot landscapes, my family and abstract images with a super 8 camera. The quality of the super 8 evokes an instantaneous feeling of nostalgia. This footage, which you see in three places in the film (the very beginning, during my brother's story, and at the very end), cut almost seamlessly with the VHS footage, despite the difference in format and quality. Perhaps it is because VHS is even dated in today's world. Using the Ektachrome film stock, the landscapes of North Dakota that appear during my brother's interview pop out in vivid blues and oranges. This same stock brings out the warmth of the interior of my parent's home at the very end of the film, adding to the hopeful feeling that completes my sister's story.

### VHS

The VHS home videos from my childhood are probably one of the most engaging aspects of the film. The family dynamic is strongly played out by all of the characters: my mother, father, sister, my brother and myself. My father, always the one filming, is present but absent. My mother is trying to make everything perfect, but also trying to deal with three very noisy kids. And my sister and I are constantly bickering. My brother, too young to speak, is very mild-mannered. This is how our family dynamics progressed

throughout my childhood and teenage years, even today. My father is still somewhat absent (though his granddaughter has brought him back into the picture recently). My mother still tries her best to make everyone happy. My sister and I are both outgoing, and fight a great deal, which is a tension that will manifest itself in a much more serious way later on in our lives. My brother is quiet and dreamy, and later on would take on a peacemaker role between my sister and I.

### CONTEMPORARY VERITÉ

The vérité footage used throughout the film contains snippets of a day in the life of my sister. For this, we shot on the Sony EX-1 camera, which allowed us beautiful HD images on a very manageable camera body. My aim was to use my sister's contemporary life to juxtapose and coincide with the story of her past. While the first section relies mainly on VHS footage of our family, the middle portion relies mainly on this contemporary vérité footage. We see Sarah working hard to support her daughter and live a stable life: preparing for work, feeding Serenity, and putting on her snowsuit. Then my mom picks Serenity up to take care of her for the day. I wanted to show the audience that my mother plays a big role in Serenity's life. My father and Jimmy are almost completely absent from this footage until the end scene. This is done purposefully, as men have come and gone throughout Sarah's life. Their presence is not nearly as prevalent as my mother's. She has devoted her life to Sarah's well being in many ways. Ultimately this is a story about motherhood – the relationship my mother has with Sarah, and the

relationship Sarah has with Serenity. This comes through in the presence of women throughout the film.

### HD HOME VIDEOS

The last portion of the film is mainly comprised of home videos taken by my mother of significant events in Sarah's adult life: her marriage and the birth of Serenity. These are also significant in that they are after the last time that Sarah ever used drugs. They are the only footage our family has of Jimmy, Sarah's husband. In these brief moments, we see how Jimmy really felt about having a child. He appears very unsure and admits to being frightened. The moments are very telling, and some of the last images to ever be taken of him. He was in Sarah's life briefly, but significant nonetheless.

## CHAPTER V: THE PRODUCTION PROCESS



*Figure 4: Sarah driving to work.*

After the sudden death of Sarah's husband, I returned to Fargo for the funeral in June of 2011. While I had thought of possibly filming the ceremony, I felt it was too soon and too sensitive to begin the project at that moment, even though it certainly solidified my decision to pursue the film. I returned in August with the aim of getting my family comfortable with the filming process. At that point, I also realized the advantage of having a separate cinematographer. This would free me up to capture sound and also maintain a macro view of the project. I filmed on and off during this first trip and tried to get a sense of the family dynamics happening after Jimmy's death. Sarah had moved into my parents' house and tension was high. Shortly afterward, she moved into a home of her

own, which alleviated a good deal of the tension and created a greater sense of stability and routine.

In September I returned with E.J. Enriquez, who would be my cinematographer throughout the project. I had originally thought of having a female cinematographer, as I had worked well with some in the past and I wanted Sarah to be extremely comfortable speaking in front of both myself and the director of photography. However, I also had seen E.J.'s work and was impressed with his sensitivity and ability to capture beautiful documentary images on the fly. He also has a very friendly and jovial manner that put people at ease instantaneously. After much deliberation and conversations with E.J., we decided that the project would be good for both of us to pursue together.

In our first visit to Fargo as a team, I interviewed Sarah specifically about the events leading up to Jimmy's death and the accident. This interview is utilized at the end of the film. We shot a good deal of footage with the family, and at that point I was fairly certain of my idea to use a combination of verité footage and animation. We shot Serenity's baptism and a cookout, as well as Sarah with her friends at a bonfire. We were very much feeling out the situation at that point still.

We returned in November for Thanksgiving and January for New Years. Many of our trips were related to holidays, as that was a time when my family gathered together. During the January shoot we collected many of our landscape shots and the bulk of our interviews. This was one of the most challenging trips, because it was then that a good deal of the family's "secrets" were revealed. Things about my family's past that I knew,

but had never really confronted, and some things that I had never known. At this point Jessie, my editor, and I began to more deliberately brainstorm ideas for a structure. This was good for my process, as I was very close to the subject matter.

Subsequently, we returned three more times to Fargo: once in July of 2012, then November of 2012, and finally February of 2013. We interviewed Sarah each time, trying to pinpoint information we had yet to collect for the story about her life. We also filmed the footage of Sarah working, with my family, and with her friends: the Thanksgiving dinner we see at the end of the film, and almost all of the verité footage used in the second portion of the film. This shooting occurred during the editing process, and I would add sections and change the film as we added more footage to our pool of resources.

## CHAPTER VI: POST PRODUCTION



*Figure 5: North Dakota Grain Field*

The post-production for the documentary began soon after the initial shooting. I was working with a former MFA student, Jessica Dorfman on the editing: the structure and themes of the film throughout the shooting period. I had talked to Jessie extensively before shooting began, and she felt very drawn to the project and the component of familial and sibling relationships. She had a background in narrative editing, but I found her work beautiful and abstract, something that might lend itself to a more artistic documentary. I felt she had a good sense of the family and from her previous films, had a good eye for visuals as well. So I thought her a good fit for the project, and she was on board right away. As she was living in Los Angeles, most of our conversations were over

the phone. Although the conversations were few and far between, they were often in-depth and lengthy.

Last November I traveled to New York and stayed there for one month to work closely with the editor. Because we were both editing on AVID systems, we were able to exchange footage, projects, and sequences easily. We met up once or twice a week, sometimes I would stay with her the entire day, watching cuts and making comments. We asked for feedback a few times from others, and it was generally quite helpful. However, by the end, I realized that the film was not saying what I had originally intended. It was beautifully composed, lyrical and poetic, but Sarah's story was not there. My advisors and friends urged me to continue working on the piece, editing it on my own. As I had no more resources to offer the editor, it was probably best for both parties.

However, ending a professional relationship with someone was very difficult for me. I have a personality that does not want to discourage or hurt others. The editor had worked with me since we began shooting and had been working hard at the editing so far. It was even more difficult because she was a nice, hard-working person. However a lesson I have learned is that your colleagues must also share your vision, and ultimately convey that vision. They must be willing to take feedback from others as well, and ultimately do what is best for the story.

I returned to Austin somewhat down and uneasy that I had to continue editing the piece on my own. The whole process of making the film was very emotionally draining and it was difficult for me to maintain distance from the subject. Many somewhat



traumatic things were revealed to me about my family. But all of my closest friends and mentors were urging me to continue, so I started cutting from what my editor had started.

I created a new structure for the film, built around my sister's life. Starting from when we were children with the VHS footage and ending with the death of her husband, probably one of the most significant events of her life. I added in the footage of the wedding and the birth of Serenity, which I found later on. I also added in much of the verité footage that is now there. The editor had done a great job with the super 8, so that portion remains relatively similar to the original cut.

Over the months of January to March, I worked continuously on the new cut. I had several rounds of feedback from my mentors and friends, and they always had great good insights that I often implemented. In February, my cinematographer and I returned for the last time to Fargo, and I completed editing with the footage we collected at that time, filling in the blanks. By March I had a rough cut and by April I was picture locked for my mix on April 18.

I have also faced some difficulty with the composer I originally had intended to use for the film. I began working with him as a suggestion from the editor, and unfortunately after the film took a different direction, I realized that the music no longer really fit the tone. As he is also located in Chicago, a long distance, communication has also been a bit of an issue. Due to these reasons, I have found an Austin band whose style fits the film very well, and I am currently using their music to accompany the film. It has a simplicity and emotional component that draws out a sense of nostalgia at the opening,

tragedy in the second act, and hope at the ending. At this point, I am pursuing licensing rights with them for two of their pieces.

Sound mixing has been the final component to the completion of the film. There were some challenges due to the differences in the timbre of some of the interviews (they were conducted in different rooms, sometimes at different times of the year). The sound mixer (Korey Panieda) and I concentrated on matching these interviews, but also eliminating background noise and keeping voices clear. After three 8-hour sessions of mixing and sweetening, we came to a good place with the audio where the voices were clear and matching, and the music, effects and voices blended nicely together.

Color correction has yet to be done on the piece. There are no glaring troubles with color temperature or brightness, so this has been the last priority for the process. Fortunately, the cinematographer did an excellent job of shooting and there were no major flaws in the images. After the screening, I hope to give it over to a color correction professional to get it graded.

## CHAPTER VII: REACTIONS TO THE FILM



*Figure 6: VHS footage of Sarah, my mother and me decorating Lucas's birthday cake.*

### FAMILY REACTIONS

After completing a very fine-tuned cut, I sent a version of the film to my sister and my mother. I knew that viewing the film in its entirety would be difficult for them. Sarah had not seen any of the wedding footage or the footage from Serenity's birth. Although I was not there to view it with them, my sister conveyed her thoughts to me later on.

Sarah was upset with a few aspects of the film. She said that she appeared as a lonely person who had no support system or friends to help her. I explained to her that no

one watching the film would think her a “lonely person” or someone to pity. Rather, they would see her as a strong individual trying to make it through very difficult circumstances and battling with a disease. She also felt the film held her responsible for her actions as a teenager: that it was all because of her nature that she was rebellious and not because of any family dysfunction or outside forces. I explained to her that the family dysfunction is apparent to those on the outside looking in – it’s subtle but very clear that there was a good deal of pressure to be “perfect” and also to not act against the status quo. The sternness of my father’s demeanor and his philosophy on mental illness comes through in the few lines he has about my sister as a teenager.

Sarah also would have liked to see more about Narcotics Anonymous and the recovery scene. I explained that because of Narcotics Anonymous regulations, I would not be able to put the logo in the film or use its name. I also was not allowed to film meetings. This makes it very difficult to bring this aspect into the film. However, to alleviate this problem and Sarah’s first issue with the film was to add in footage at the very end of Thanksgiving with her friends and our family. It was way to bring in her recovery group as well as show the audience that she does have support and people that care about her. She is not struggling on her own.

My mother had a different issue with the film. She is always very supportive of my work, but after watching the documentary she said, “You know, I think it’s difficult when it’s your own life that is being portrayed.” She felt hurt that my sister says that she “got left behind a lot.” My mother feels that if anything, she was too active in Sarah’s

life. Because of this I cut out one piece of a line, so Sarah no longer says “and I got left behind a lot.” Now she just says, “I just didn’t want to be left alone and I didn’t want to be left behind.” It is still powerful but doesn’t have the same implications without the ending.

With these comments in mind, I made a few alterations to the film that addressed these issues but also ultimately made the film stronger. I do not wish to completely alter the film to reflect what my family would like, but I also want them to see the overall message it conveys and that it could be helpful to other families.

### OTHERS’ REACTIONS

As earlier stated, I have shown multiple cuts to colleagues, mentors, and friends. All their reactions to the final versions of the film have been positive. Although as Sarah says, “we are not perfect human beings,” and this is far from a perfect film in many ways, I believe it will be relevant. People connect very strongly to my sister and feel both compassion and respect for her ability to endure such tragedy and struggle. The film has not yet been screened for a large audience, but I hope that everyone who watches will connect with the story and with my sister, and leave with a greater understanding of addiction and its effects.

## CHAPTER VIII: AFTER COMPLETION



*Figure 7: Serenity waves goodbye (on Super 8 film).*

After completion of the documentary and the screening for the Department of Radio-Television-Film, I hope to bring the film to people who could benefit from Sarah's story. I will pursue the common road of film festivals, but also reach beyond that to communities and people who are touched by addiction. I have already been in contact with the YWCA of Austin to partner with them on a screening of the film.

### FILM FESTIVALS

I will enter the film in festivals around the country, focusing on documentary film festivals and small regional film festivals. These are best for connecting with people who genuinely care about quality films and the filmmakers who create them. They are also wonderful for meeting other documentary filmmakers, who I might want to work with in the future. I plan to also enter festivals that spotlight women filmmakers in particular, and stories with strong female characters.

#### NARCOTICS ANONYMOUS AND REHAB CENTERS

These are the audiences I truly would like to reach out to, those who might benefit most from hearing Sarah's story. Sarah is already respected in NA and seen as a role model, especially for the young women there. I hope that we will be able to travel to small places around the country and meet with some of these fellowships, combining the film itself with Sarah as a guest speaker. Furthermore, I would like to contact rehabilitations centers, especially those focused on youth, to encourage young women struggling with addiction who could benefit from hearing Sarah's story.

#### SCHOOLS OF SOCIAL WORK

The documentary may also be of interest to different universities, especially departments of psychology and social work. I hope to partner with an organization that distributes educational films in order to get the film to these institutions. Again, Sarah

could accompany the film at screenings in different academic settings to speak in more detail about her experience and to field questions.



## CHAPTER IX: THE BIG PICTURE



*Figure 8: Serenity*

Ultimately my hope with *My Sister Sarah* is that it proves beneficial for Sarah, my family, and others. I hope that my sister has found the process of telling her story on film to be therapeutic. I hope that by hearing my sister's side of the story that my parents will understand her better, that they will see their own part within it. I hope that it brings our family closer together in some way. Lastly, I hope that other people will be inspired by Sarah and her life, by her struggles and her resilience. That they may be feeling the same way, but can see they are not alone. Or perhaps they have family members going through something similar, and will understand them a bit better because of this film.

That is the ultimate hope. That the film is not simply a film, but something means to something greater.

## **APPENDIX:**

### **CONTINUING FELLOWSHIP STATEMENT OF PURPOSE**

Elizabeth Chatelain  
UT EID: emc2296  
MFA Film and Video Production  
Documentary Film Production  
Graduate School Continuing Fellowship Statement of Purpose

Using the skills I have acquired as a graduate student of film production, I will return to my hometown of Fargo, North Dakota to document my sister's continuing struggle with methamphetamines addiction and her recovery. Sarah, the main focus of the project, will provide a critical connection to the world of methamphetamines abuse among young women in rural North Dakota. Because of our familial connection and emotional trust, she has agreed to share with me her intimate experiences with addiction. Moreover, interviews with family members will help illustrate the wider effects of addiction on both family and community.

Having experienced meth addiction within my own family, I feel compelled to explore this subject to both inform and encourage others. My sister's story illustrates the singular problems that young people face today in rural America. With North Dakota's limited avenues of recreation and the common anxieties of adolescence, many teenagers resort to abusing drugs, particularly methamphetamines. Starting at age 15, my sister was in and out of rehabilitation centers for 13 years. Her addiction devastated our family, driving my father to alcoholism and my mother to depression. My brother and I often felt neglected because our parents' attention was primarily focused on my sister's destructive behavior. We now understand that her torturous addiction was uncontrollable. With the help of a national support group, Narcotics Anonymous, Sarah has remained sober for three years and is now working at a drug rehabilitation center. Her inspiring ability to overcome this devastating addiction compels me to share her story to others.

Despite a concerted effort to eradicate methamphetamines abuse in North Dakota, the number of female meth users has continually risen over the past few decades. Approximately 80-90% of female inmates in North Dakota Women's Penitentiary are incarcerated for meth-related offenses. The sparsely inhabited farmland proves ideal for concealing meth labs, and meth is considerably less expensive than cocaine and heroine. But what are some of the interior motives that drive an increasing number of young women in rural communities to use methamphetamines? What are some of the effects on their families and the community? By concentrating on one woman's in-depth personal account, I will examine the complexities and ramifications of women's decisions to abuse methamphetamines.

As an MFA Film and Video Production candidate, I have spent the last two years making films about women facing extreme social and psychological adversity. My first documentary project, *The Lost Girl*, profiles one of the “Lost Girls of Sudan” who walked thousands of miles across the desert and jungles of Africa to a refugee camp in Kenya. It documents her continuing struggle as an immigrant in the United States. My second project, a short fiction film, entitled *Karin’s Shoes*, follows a pair of sisters who face substantial financial and familial hardships. Their financial depravity is such that buying a new pair of shoes leads to destructive familial division. Eventually the girls come to realize that the bonds of family override the importance of material possessions. My current project, *Little Felix*, explores the relationship between mother and son as they cope with the father’s death. The protagonist’s inability to cope psychologically makes her powerless to save another child’s life.

As in my previous films, I wish to present my sister’s story in an organic and unorthodox way. By using Sarah’s artwork to tell the story, I will avoid conventional interviews, stock footage and photographs. Painting and drawing are my sister’s most significant emotional outlets in dealing with her addiction. Her artwork not only illustrates her experience literally, but also expresses the psychological turmoil she has combated throughout her life. I intend to incorporate her own artistic expression into the documentary by animating her paintings over her narration of past experiences. In addition, I will use footage from her life as it is now to illustrate her continuing recovery.

This fall I will return to North Dakota and begin my research. Interviews of my sister Sarah, my family members, local authorities, addiction counselors and other addicts will provide insight into the world of methamphetamines and addiction. My sister will guide me to the locations where her most significant experiences of drug abuse occurred: schools, crack houses, freight trains, hospitals, and recovery institutions. I will also collect my sister’s artwork and find appropriate pieces to utilize in the film. I will spend the Spring semester analyzing the interviews and footage, and begin animating my sister’s drawings with the guidance of the animation professor in the RTF Department.

In this project I will present a personal perspective on methamphetamines addiction. Despite significant empirical research conducted on meth abuse, there is still incomplete qualitative material on women addicts, their families, and communities in North Dakota. Other documentary films on the subject lack an intimate personal connection with the addict. By using my sister’s most intimate psychological outlet during her years of abuse—her art—I will shed light on the interior anguish of this addiction. This film will both provide the opportunity for Sarah to tell her story and also encourage the growing number of young women addicts to continue their own struggle towards recovery.

## **WORKS CITED**

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